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Claremont McKenna College

*Gamblers and the Game of Life:*  
**A Literary Examination of the Professional and the Addict**

submitted to

Professor Nicholas Warner

by

Annika Ozizmir

for

Senior Thesis

Spring 2023

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## Preface

I am not a gambler. I have no personal experience with this subject, yet I chose this topic because I wanted to learn more about a persona that I struggle to understand.

Most of our choices lead to uncertain outcomes. As a result, understanding a person's approach to the unknown can explain a lot about their decisions. I believe that you can tell a lot about a person from how their handling of risk, how their hopes manifest themselves, and the ways they respond to stress – all of which we can discover about someone while they gamble. Thus, I research the gambler so that I can explore the human condition.

Luck in literature is a tricky subject. The way I see it, the problem is that gambling cannot genuinely exist in fiction. The outcomes cannot play out naturally. In real life, there exists a mismatch between the way we interpret predestiny and the cold randomness with which events actually take place. Despite how rational we might be, we all, to a certain extent, derive meaning from past events and expect patterns in future ones. Probabilities, however, behave separately from our imaginations. They operate without feeling or deliberation. On the other hand, authors act like gods. They create the destinies and decide the lucks of their characters. With this added dimension, the study of the gambler in literature becomes altogether unique. Fiction affords us the opportunity to meet the gambler in a world where outcomes are not random, but they are instead artificially engineered.

Therefore, this thesis topic holds in it a compelling contradiction. How do we understand the gambler in a world where gambling is impossible? My response is that because the author

writes the outcomes, I am able to explore a new world in which I can find meaning in the gambler's good and bad luck. In fiction, luck actually means something because it is written with intention.

## Introduction: Who Is the Gambler?

Who is the gambler? This question seems simple enough. The gambler is a person who gambles. Anyone can be a gambler. Yet specific types of people often come to mind when we ask ourselves this question. Sometimes the gambler has an unbreakable poker face: sharp, suave, and stoic. Though we might imagine that the gambler is desperate, a person who cannot stop, even after losing everything. They stay awake at the slot machines of empty, cheap roadside casinos, driving themselves mad over random luck. Or, we are thinking of someone else, maybe a bored college student who plays online poker during their lectures. A smoke-filled room might come to mind, V.I.P. access only, of course, holding in it rich people who play for the thrill. Perhaps we see a warmer picture of gamblers: a group of friends playing cards together at low stakes, simply to enjoy one another's company. In literature and pop culture, these characters and scenes always appear. Some of us even meet them in casinos or on the Internet. Some of us are these people.

In this thesis, I explore two quintessential gamblers: the professional gambler and the gambling addict. I illustrate the archetypal professional and addict by analyzing four protagonists from a mix of four novels and short stories: *Casino Royale* (1953) by Ian Fleming, “A Gentleman’s Game” (2016) by Jonathan Lethem, “Queen of Spades” (1834) by Alexander Pushkin, and *The Gambler* (1866) by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The characters I investigate most thoroughly are James Bond, Alexander Bruno, Hermann, and Alexei Ivanovich, respectively. With these authors' vivid descriptions and realistic narrations, each protagonist comes to life on the page. I hope to do justice to these characters' complexity and depth. Thus, each section delves into the nuances of each protagonist and how they are either similar or different.



While my analysis does touch on some of the themes at the forefront of these texts, such as gender, socioeconomic status, spiritual identity, and ethnicity, none of these topics are the primary focus of this thesis. Wealth and status, for example, are essential factors that Dostoevsky argues help determine one's relationship to gambling. He also draws parallels between the Russian man with the plight of the gambling addict. These topics are worthwhile, but I do not expound on them here. There are also many gamblers in these texts, such as the Grandmother in *The Gambler* or Le Chiffre from *Casino Royale*, who I only briefly mention, and some I do not examine as gamblers. Instead, I spend the majority of these pages focusing on the texts' protagonists. In particular, I examine their personality characteristics, aspirations, beliefs, relationships, and behavior in and out of the game.

Before I begin my analysis, I should further outline some of what the scope of this essay does and does not include. First, to clarify, when I mention gambling, I am constantly referring to gambling at games of chance. Because I wanted to explore each protagonist's gameplay in particular, I have chosen to leave betting out of my discussion. Also, I do not study the hobbyist or the vice gambler. I decided not to include the gambler as the average person in its own section because I found this persona too broad. I will, however, mention "regular" people in my conclusion. There are plenty of stories about gambling which do not make it into this thesis: *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens, parts of *Taipei People* by Pai Hsien-yung, "A Terribly Strange Bed" by Wilkie Collins, and the rest of Fleming's Bond novels, to name a few. While one can identify numerous dynamic examples of gambling in Eastern literature by Pu Songling and other writers, I do not explore these texts here. The professional gamblers I discuss are Western, one British and one American, whereas both gambling addicts are Russian characters. I also do

not mention any films or other forms of media which might be especially relevant to this thesis, given my inclusion of James Bond. These sources offer compelling ways to further explore the questions and conclusions I make in this thesis.

I organize my arguments into "Part One: The Professional" and "Part Two: The Addict." Each part answers questions about the characters. These questions help us better understand the gambler: Why do they gamble? How do they play? What is their relationship with luck? These questions help form the chapters you will find within each section. As I introduce you to these characters, I hope you will enjoy them as much as I have.

## Part One: The Professional

Let me introduce you to the professional gambler. Ideally, he is a man who brings class and skill to the gambling table. While the professional gambler does not have to be a man, he is often stereotypically masculine; he is attractive, stoic, and intimidating. In this section, I analyze two male professional gamblers, so I will use he/him pronouns throughout this section to refer to the professional gambler persona. I will use these same pronouns in Part Two for similar reasons. Unlike people who gamble for fun, the professional gambler has a relationship with the game itself, as if it were another living thing with its own secrets and its own will. This relationship is often akin to a romance. To them, this game is about more than just the money, the socialization, the status, or the distraction that it offers. Because of the game's importance to the professional, gambling is generally high-stakes in more ways than one. Thus, it is essential that he prepares correctly. To him, the game is a craft that demands not only skill but also a command of his own character and sometimes a moral authority over the other players. In the mind of the professional gambler, winners are superior people.

When seeking to better understand the professional gambler in literature, we should look to Ian Fleming's James Bond from the novel *Casino Royale* and Jonathan Lethem's Bruno from the short story "A Gentleman's Game." James Bond belongs at the forefront of this discussion, serving as the archetypal professional gambler. *Casino Royale* is a classic story about high-stakes gambling, and James Bond himself a lasting cultural icon. In the novel, Bond, an elite British secret agent, gambles as a part of a covert spy mission targeted against the Russians. His assignment is to use his gambling skills to bankrupt Le Chiffre, an agent for the USSR and the leader of a

Communist-controlled trade union. Working with the beautiful Vesper Lynd, his boss' assistant, he succeeds both professionally and romantically, managing to win both baccarat and Vesper's affections. Alexander Bruno, the protagonist of "A Gentleman's Game" by Jonathan Lethem, is not as lucky. As a professional backgammon player, he often competes against high-profile people. His associate, Edgar Falk, spends weeks organizing a match-up between Bruno and Billy Yik Tho Lim, the former director of the I.S.D. (Singapore's secret police). Falk also puts a large financial stake in the game. Unfortunately, despite all this anticipation and Bruno's overconfidence, he loses handily. To make matters worse, he has similarly disappointing experiences with women. Fleming establishes Bruno's reputation as a womanizer, causing us to expect Bruno to do well with women. Sadly though, he does not end up with Tira Harpaz, the woman in whom he has a genuine interest.

In "Part One: The Professional," I compare Bond and Bruno to help characterize the professional gambler. By analyzing the differences between these two men, we can better understand what distinguishes successful and unsuccessful players. I split this section into chapters. In "Chapter One: Default Masculine Blur," I explore the general similarities between Bond and Bruno. Then, "Chapter Two: What Are We Wagering For?" delves into the ways in which, despite their shared love of gambling, these men have clashing motives and values. After making these essential distinctions, I use the next two chapters to explore the reasons for Bond's success and the causes of Bruno's collapse. "Chapter Three: Discipline and the Dice" pays particular attention to the men's preparation, sobriety, and mental focus – or lack thereof – whereas "Chapter Four: Love and Other Games" deals with Bond and Bruno's behavior around women and how these actions correlate with gambling outcomes.

## Chapter One: *Default Masculine Blur*

To begin, we should first acknowledge what these two men most obviously have in common. First, there are some circumstantial similarities between Bond's and Bruno's storylines. Both men play shady intelligence or former intelligence officials. Bond competes against Le Chiffre, an evil man who assigns people to threaten Bond's life during the game. Bruno's opponent, Billy Yik Tho Lim, does not directly endanger Bruno. However, Lim wears a pistol during their game and keeps an armed bodyguard in the room with them. While Bruno's backgammon game does not carry with it the same risks as Bond's covert spy mission, there still exists some implicit threat of violence. In the back of his mind, "Bruno [imagines]" that human screams could be covered by the surf's roar [before deciding] that he [is] being silly" (Lethem). Also, Bond and Bruno have people who support their games and give them financial backing. Falk's role as Bruno's associate resembles that of Bond's trusted colleague Mathis. Falk and Mathis offer the professional gamblers advice when necessary, and both men are a consistent presence surrounding their most important match-ups. Falk joins Bruno's taxi ride to the game with Billy Yik Tho Lim. Falks even helps with damage control, covering Bruno's embarrassing hickey with makeup at the last minute. Similarly, Mathis protects Bond. When two men nearly kill Bond, Mathis is the first to arrive at the scene. Mathis also keeps a watchful eye over the baccarat game with Le Chiffre and urges Bond not to give up his career when Bond shares his doubts.

Beyond their parallel storylines, Bond and Bruno share some key personality characteristics. Both men are talented at playing games of chance. Bond is considered one of the best gamblers working in British Intelligence. Meanwhile, wealthy, influential people seek to test

themselves against Bruno, the “backgammon wizard” (Lethem). One of the primary reasons why Bond and Bruno are so skilled at these games of chance is that they are both observant. When they are focused, they are able to quickly judge other players' strengths, weaknesses, and styles of play. Before Bond's game with Le Chiffre, he judges all the players at the table. He then makes specific, educated guesses about how well each person will perform. For example, Bond guesses that Mr. and Mrs. Du Pont, the players at places number four and five, will be "stayers," meaning that they will last further into the game. He reaches this conclusion after noticing their "business-like look" and their easy and cheerful conversation, which leads Bond to believe that the couple is smart and "very much at home at the big game" (Fleming 74). Thinking strategically, Bond decides that he will loan them money during the game if they would need it. We discover that his impressions of the Du Ponts are correct. When Mrs. Du Pont makes a mistake at the beginning of the game, she scolds herself but remains determined to stay in the game and play better. Bruno shares Bond's affinity for understanding others' gameplay. Bruno can effectively scrutinize Stolarsky's skill level and strategy by the first pause in their game. He concludes that Stolarsky has a "spongey intelligence" and notices that Stolarsky, unlike other Internet-taught rookies, "[is not] stuck on one or another principle of play at the expense of what the dice [command]" (Lethem). With this thorough understanding of his opponent, Bruno handily wins five out of the first seven games without even using all the advantages at his disposal. Because Bond and Bruno are attentive and intelligent, they are well-suited for professional gambling.

Bond and Bruno are similar outside of gambling as well. Both men have a passion for winning games and playing women. Bond is one of pop culture's most iconic womanizers. He is good-looking and generally does not take his relationships with women seriously. He believes that

"women [are] for recreation" (Fleming 35). Bruno also has a lecherous reputation. When Stolarsky sees Bruno for the first time in decades, he remarks that Bruno is "the one that all the moms were in love with" (Lethem). We also learn that Stolarsky used to interrogate Bruno about women, trying to learn from Bruno's experience. He calls Bruno "Flashman," referring to the bad-boy protagonist from a book series written by George MacDonald Fraser. Stolarsky gives Bruno this nickname because he claims that Bruno models himself after this fictional rake and cheat. While the comparison between Bruno and Flashman emphasizes Bruno's dishonesty in his dealings with women growing up, it also reveals what must have been a successful string of "conquests." Bond and Bruno's success with women can be partially attributed to their masculinity and attractiveness. Both men are confident, stoic, and cleanly dressed, often depicted wearing suits. Lethem even directly suggests that Bond and Bruno resemble one another. Cynthia Jalter, the woman Bruno kisses mid-game, admires him, saying that he looks like James Bond. Although Stolarsky jealousy denies their resemblance, he does admit that Bruno has a manly appearance, calling him a "default masculine blur" (Lethem). Professional gamblers are not required to be masculine men, or even to be men at all. However, handsome characters like Bond and Bruno often represent this persona in fiction, so much so that many people associate gambling at the professional level with masculinity.

## Chapter Two: *What Are We Wagering For?*

Professional gamblers always have a mission. Bond and Bruno are similar in that they both derive meaning from gambling beyond money, fun, or status. Lethem and Fleming personify games of chance, revealing the depth with which these professionals form their relationship with gambling. To Bruno, the dice have an almost god-like ability to “[determine] fate” and “[reveal] character” (Lethem). Associating the game with honesty, he has a lifelong relationship with backgammon. Bond also asserts that he has "always been a gambler" (Fleming 48). Bond finds luck to have "moods," just like women do. In fact, his relationship with luck is not unlike romance. Asserting that luck must be "softly wooed or brutally ravaged, never pandered to pursued," Bond treats his games of chance as if they were women. While he believes that, one day, either luck or women will defeat him, he still maintains that luck has to be "loved and not feared" (Fleming 49). Bruno and Bond's human-like relationships with games of chance make their sentimentality towards these activities unsurprising. However, they are sentimental for different reasons.

Bond enjoys gambling because of its connection to the elite and powerful. He loves the aesthetic surrounding fancy casinos like those in Royale-les-Eaux, a fictional French gambling town, appreciating the elegance of these exorbitant establishments. Fleming describes what Bond enjoys about gambling:

He loved the dry riffle of the cards and the constant unemphatic drama of the quiet figures around the green tables. He liked the solid, studied comfort of card-rooms and casinos, the well-padded arms of the chairs, the glass of whiskey or champagne at the elbow, the quiet unhurried attention of good servants. (Fleming 48)



In this passage, we learn that Bond enjoys the sophistication of the other gamblers in these high-end casinos as they calmly risk large sums of money. Thriving in the company of these classy individuals, Bond finds comfort in these card rooms and casinos. Notes all their expensive details, he celebrates the "well-padded arms of the chairs," the well-placed drinks, and the rush of attentive servants that he observes in these lavish rooms. Not only does Bond love these casinos and cardrooms, but he seems to belong there, finding no issue with their performative extravagance and over-priced drinks. He further embraces this atmosphere by treating Vesper to the finest and most unnecessarily expensive options on the menu once he's won. As a distinguished member of MI6, Bond gambles as a part of his patriotic duty on behalf of his country. Thus, his motive is to protect the world he comes from and uphold the pillars of British society.

By contrast, Bruno loves backgammon because it offers him the unique opportunity to humble spoiled and rich men. To Bruno, games of chance are cut and dry, and they are more honest than real life. Bruno lives in a world where cheesy men like Stolarsky own massive riches, but they are not meant to beat him in backgammon. In backgammon, the best man always wins. We learn about Stolarsky through his partiality to his own backgammon set. Lethem writes:

He preferred to use his own set, with its smoothly inlaid points, its simple wood checkers, stained light and dark. No ivory or mother of pearl, no stitched felt or leather points to cushion the play. (Lethem)

Bruno wants his game to be as pure as possible, unobstructed by the unnecessary flashiness of ivory or mother of pearl. He does not care for stitched felt detailing or expensive leather because they soften the "clacking sounds of the checkers," which he interprets to be the "music of honest

thought” (Lethem). Admiring the simplicity of his personal set, Bruno has a sentimental attachment to it. Like the harsh unambiguousness of truth, his set is "stained light and dark." The cheaper wooden checkers are all he needs. Bruno's aversion to the more sophisticated sets mirrors his cynical attitude towards the elite more generally. Thus, his insistence that his game be pure and "un-cushioned" by expensive details demonstrates why he loves gambling. Bruno plays to rebel against the odds which determine winners and losers outside the game. When Stolarsky asks Bruno what Bruno does, he replies, "I relieve wealthy men of the delusion that they're any good at backgammon" (Lethem). His motive is to use gambling as a tool for humiliation. With his skills, he hopes to prove to these men that they are not as untouchable as they believe themselves to be. Unlike Bond, he does not seek comfort in the elite and instead strives to beat them at backgammon.

### Chapter Three: *Discipline and the Dice*

The professional gambler must behave professionally. After all, gambling is, as Lethem's title suggests, "A Gentleman's Game." We learn about the importance of self-control and dedication through the contrast between Bond and Bruno as they prepare for their big games. Bond behaves with perfect discipline, while Bruno allows his baser desires to overwhelm him, leaving him in poor shape to gamble. Thus, Bond serves as the archetype for what the professional gambler should do, while Bruno strives for this ideal but fails to meet Bond's standard, ultimately unraveling by the end of the story. In *Casino Royale*, Fleming describes in great detail Bond's rituals, which begin days before his important game with Le Chiffre. Bond observes what he calls "one of the conventions among roulette players" (Fleming 50), in which he pays careful attention to the roulette wheels themselves, taking note of any ways in which the odds may be biased by its structure or by the croupier's skill. Although he knows that over time these imperfections have been smoothed out and the game perfected, he continues to "rigidly adhere" to this tradition out of a belief that "the more effort and ingenuity you put into gambling, the more you [take] out" (Fleming 50). Rather than defending the irrational ritual for superstitious reasons, Bond follows this practice because he views it as another habit through which he further dedicates himself to the game. Even though Bond knows that this convention will not yield him any material advantages in gameplay, his devotion to roulette is so strong that he spends days observing the wheels and croupiers nonetheless.

Bond continues to demonstrate his commitment to gambling through his extensive physical and mental preparation. "Determined to be completely fit and relaxed" before his gambling

session, he orders a masseuse, makes sure that he sleeps well, and takes a cold shower. These actions mirror those of an athlete before a competition, revealing the impressive level of seriousness with which Bond treats his body before gambling. In the days leading up to his climactic baccarat game with Le Chiffre, he plays many practice games at lower stakes in order to "[give] his nerves and card-sense a thorough work-out" (Fleming 30). In describing Bond's practice as a "work-out," Fleming continues to compare Bond's physical preparation to that of an athlete. The fact that Bond must exercise his senses and nerves before this important game reveals the seriousness with which Bond approaches the stress that comes with high-stakes gambling. As a successful professional gambler, he prepares for this pressure similarly to how an athlete anticipates stress on his or her body. Once he arrives back at the casino, he strives to regain his command over the tables, observing as much about the games and players as possible. Fleming describes Bond as having a "focus which is half mathematical and half intuitive . . . with a slow pulse and a sanguine temperament" (Fleming 48). This mental state, Bond believes, provides one with the "essential equipment" one needs to win. In this sense, this necessary combination of attributes tells us that professional gamblers must practice near-complete self-control if they are to be successful. Bond's methodical approach is near scientific. He balances his mental state, using both intuitive and mathematical thinking. His self-discipline is so powerful that he even demonstrates some control over his temperament and pulse, seeking to slow himself down and keep his emotions calm.

While Bruno does not behave like a gentleman, he, much like Bond, does understand gambling as being the byproduct of one's character and decisions. Both men share the philosophy

that one's outcome in gambling is a product of his actions. When telling us why Bond enjoys gambling, Fleming writes:

Above all, [Bond] liked it that everything was one's own fault. There was only oneself to praise or blame. Luck was a servant and not a master. Luck had to be accepted with a shrug or taken advantage of up to the hilt. But it had to be understood and recognized for what it was and not confused with a faulty appreciation of the odds, for, at gambling, the deadly sin is to mistake bad play for bad luck. (Fleming 49)

Not only does he accept the credence that the player is solely responsible for his wins and losses, but he embraces this philosophy. He enjoys that, from his perspective, roulette is a game through which his own actions are the driving force. Although many people tend to attribute more of their outcomes to luck, seeing it as a deciding factor in games of chance like roulette, Bond does not yield this critical influence to the odds. Instead, he recognizes that luck is an influential force in the game, but he claims to have power over it: "luck [is] a servant and not a master." While luck is powerful, Bond believes that the odds perform at his will. Bruno also claims agency over the outcomes in games of chance. He feels that the sounds and feelings of backgammon are authentic and beautiful. To Bruno, "the clacking of the checkers on the hardwood points was the music of honest thought" (Lethem). He interprets the odds of the game as being sincerely influenced by some moral compass of right and wrong and always reflecting some higher truth. "Bruno for his entire life associated backgammon with candor, the dice not determining fate so much as revealing character" (Lethem). When Bruno finally begins to lose at the same time as his self-control

crumbles, Fleming shows us how Bruno's philosophy on gambling works against him once he abandons his principles.

Trouble begins when Bruno comes across Stolarsky, his high school acquaintance. After learning that Bruno is a professional backgammon player, Stolarsky quickly teaches himself the game and challenges Bruno. Although Bruno beats Stolarsky overall, Bruno begins to lose towards the end of their session. As a professional, he has plenty of experience playing better opponents than Stolarsky. At first, he has no problem winning five out of his seven games with Stolarsky and classifies Stolarsky's gameplay as "not too shabby" (Lethem) but, overall, uninteresting. He displays classless arrogance with Stolarsky. Even as Stolarsky is losing, Bruno continues pressuring him to up the gambling stakes to invigorate the game. When Stolarsky asks if Bruno pays attention to the bets just as well when Bruno is losing, Bruno arrogantly replies that he would not know. Suggesting that he does not lose, Bruno mocks Stolarsky and believes that Stolarsky does not stand a chance against him. His effortless dismissal of Stolarsky's novice skills makes his losses later in the evening that much more humiliating. Bruno's behavior during the game, which begins as brazen arrogance and devolves into debauchery, coincides with his losses at backgammon.

As his first fatal mistake, Bruno wrecks his mental attention with his lack of sobriety. Upon Stolarsky's suggestion, Bruno does multiple lines of cocaine mid-game. The cocaine distorts his perception and mental faculties, "[stretching] the parameters of the room, and also [his] skull" (Lethem). Because he cannot think clearly while under the influence, a fatal rift forms between himself and the game: "A chasm [reveals] itself, between his eyes and the board, and between his

brain and his eyes” (Lethem). Bruno's flagrant substance abuse contrasts Bond's disciplined treatment of alcohol around gambling. Bond engineers his own custom drink order which perfectly meets his gambling needs: "Three measures of Gordon's, one of vodka, half a measure of Kina Lillet. Shake it very well until it's ice-cold, then add a large thin slice of lemon-peel" (Fleming 52). Explaining his rationale, Bond says that he never has more than one drink before dinner when he needs to concentrate, but he asserts that this drink needs to be "large and very strong and very cold and very well made" (Fleming 52). He has an almost ritualistic approach to drinking before gambling and does not allow himself to go beyond his limits. By contrast, Bruno is suggestible, accepting Stolarsky's offer of hard drugs at the first opportunity. He quickly becomes too inebriated to give backgammon his undivided attention, losing all of the last six games to Stolarsky. Fleming also suggests that Bruno becomes dependent on cocaine during this game. Once the cocaine is gone, it "[leaves] a hole in the center of his attention, of his sight" (Lethem). The drug interferes with his focus to the point where Bruno ultimately needs it to stay competitive. Fleming marks the moment when the cocaine disappears as “the official start of [Bruno’s] losing streak” (Lethem). Bruno continues losing into the next day during his much-anticipated game with Billy Yik Tho Lim. Because of his lack of self-control the night before, he is unknowingly doomed before his game with Lim even begins.

#### Chapter Four: *Love and Other Games*

The professional gambler is a player of both games and women. However, they are not immune to the intoxicating influence of lust, just as they are not safe from the ravages of Lady Luck. Bruno, unlike Bond, succumbs to the influence of women. Toward the end of his game with Stolarsky, Bruno allows Cynthia Jalter to become a distraction. Fleming describes how Bruno "barely [attends]" (Lethem) his later games with Stolarsky and instead finds himself making out with Cynthia instead of paying attention to the moves. When Stolarsky offers Bruno the money he has won, Stolarsky becomes quickly offended by Bruno's focus on Cynthia. Stolarsky says, "Here, I'll put the doubling cube down her fucking shirt where you can find it" (Lethem). Although Bruno begins the story embarrassed by Stolarsky's brazenness, Bruno's own vices ultimately catch up to him. By the end of their competition, Bruno is the one frustrating Stolarsky with his uncouth behavior and public horniness. Unlike Bruno, Bond refuses to let women occupy his attention before he completes his mission. Although he finds Vesper attractive, he behaves coldly toward her leading up to his big game with Le Chiffre. Once he leaves her and has a moment to himself before beginning baccarat, he is relieved. Instead of focusing on Vesper, he seeks to "clear his mind of everything but the task at hand" (Fleming 72). The discipline which Bond excels at achieving and Bruno fails to practice again applies to the temptations of sex as well as substances.

Bruno's failure in love coincides with his backgammon losses. Not only does he suffer an embarrassing loss against Billy Yik Tho Lim, but he cannot be with Tira Harpaz. Bruno finds Tira attractive and is quickly comfortable enough with her that he shares personal details about his childhood, something he generally refuses to do. He belatedly appreciates the "startling sweetness"



of their interactions, much like how he notices "the condensed milk at the bottom of his glass, which [creeps] between his lips only after he [drains] the black coffee above" (Lethem). Once Tira is already back with Stolarsky, he finally appreciates being with her. Failing to be with the woman he truly wants, Bruno settles for Cynthia, a woman he finds both annoying and "decidedly unattractive" (Lethem). She brandishes his neck with a hickey. This mark follows him to his important game with Lim and uncovers itself during his humiliating loss. Mocking him, Lim points at the hickey and tells him that Bruno is unfit to play. Thus, this mark serves as the physical manifestation of his bad luck and poor character leading up to this game. Lucky for Bond, he wins both baccarat and Vesper's love. Earlier in the novel, he "[accepts] the fact that he [will] be brought to his knees by either love or luck" (Fleming 49). Although he ends up with Vesper, her heartbreaking betrayal proves his prediction correct. When Bond loses Vesper, we learn that Bond can get the girl and defeat his enemies at the gambling tables, but he is still fallible. While a professional gambler can master love and luck, he cannot beat all the odds in life.

## **Part Two: The Addict**

The gambling addict is passionate but deprived, ambitious but unfulfilled. Like other addicts, once he starts, he cannot stop. He wants nothing except to win. His relationship with the game is complicated. The professional gambler has a consistent, lifelong partnership with the game, but the addict cannot achieve this balance. He both accepts and rejects the game, unable to come to terms with his dependence. Thus, he lives in denial. Unlike the professional gambler, the gambling addict does not approach the game with aspirations above greed. Instead, the game itself is the mission, and he wants money and status. Gambling is everything. The odds as they fall provide everything good and terrible, all the passion the addict craves. The addict is also not like the professional in that he does not strive to achieve near-perfect self-control. His standards are much lower. The addict is lucky if he keeps his sanity among his superstitious impulses and greedy desires.

Naturally, I seek out the wisdom of Russian authors to better understand the more dysfunctional side of gambling. “The Queen of Spades” by Alexander Pushkin is a celebrated cautionary tale. Pushkin tells the story of Hermann, an ethnic German, who starts off as a cautious man with an aversion to risk but a fascination with gambling. Upon hearing the legend of the Countess' secret to guessing three cards in a row, Hermann stops at nothing to uncover this method which would guarantee gambling wins. He deceives Lizaveta, the old woman's ward, so that he can get closer to the Countess. Then, he accidentally scares the old woman to death. Though he ultimately learns the secret, he cannot stop gambling and loses everything. He descends into total madness by the end of the story.

*The Gambler* by Dostoevsky was also an obvious choice for this section. Dostoevsky himself suffered from his own gambling addiction and thus drew some of the insights in his novel from personal experience. Ironically, Dostoevsky hurriedly wrote this novel to pay off his gambling debts. Biographical considerations aside, Dostoevsky's writing style makes him an essential addition to this analysis. He famously brings the human psyche to life. Thus, his novel provides this thesis with an up-close-and-personal perspective on the gambling addict. *The Gambler* is about Alexei Ivanovich, a tutor for a once-wealthy family who begins to struggle financially. The story follows love for Polina Alexandrovna and chronicles the evolution of his roulette addiction.

Though the Grandmother, Antonida Vasilevna, from *The Gambler* exhibits many of the behaviors I discuss in this section of my thesis. For example, she gambles obsessively and cannot bring herself to stop. Against the entreaties of others, she loses large sums of money and thinks of nothing else. She is also deeply superstitious. However, I chose to focus on Alexei. Dostoevsky's first-person narration from Alexei's perspective gives me the unique opportunity to understand the gambling addict's complex mental state in elaborate detail. As the protagonist, he provides me with more substance through which to discuss the themes in each chapter. For similar reasons, I do not discuss the Countess' gambling habits or why she chooses to quit. These characters might help us reach more compelling conclusions upon further analysis.

In "Part Two: The Addict," I compare Hermann and Alexei so that we can better understand the gambling addict. In their similarities, a picture emerges of how obsessive gambling manifests itself in the extreme. Additionally, their differences demonstrate what varying the levels of the

addiction's severity look like. I organize this section into three chapters. "Chapter One: *A Futile and Mindless Pursuit*" details how Hermann and Alexei's obsessions develop, describing how gambling addiction evolves from each man's initial resistance. "Chapter Two: *Passion at Play*" discusses how the greed gambling begets blocks the addict's expression of empathy and desire for human connection. Through its brief examination of Alexei and Polina's relationship, this chapter places a particular emphasis on romantic love. Lastly, "Chapter Three: *Magical Thinking*" explores the addict's insanity. It discusses the ways in which the addict allows his belief in superstition and magic to make him delusional. In the end, the gambling addict is destined for madness if he does not escape his obsession.

## Chapter One: *A Futile and Mindless Pursuit*

The gambling addict initially resists the game. In the cases of both Alexei and Hermann, neither man gambles at first. In fact, both men criticize the practice. While the professional from the previous section has always identified himself as a gambler, the addict does not take to gambling at first. Being around gambling makes him anxious, and he judges those who partake. However, both men contradict themselves when they express their disapproval of gambling. While they both claim that gambling will get them nowhere, they simultaneously hope for it to change their lives completely. Despite his protestations, the addict quickly turns his toxic mix of dislike and fascination into obsession. After depriving himself of the game, once he starts gambling, he cannot stop.

Hermann maintains that gambling is not worth the risk. Generally depriving himself of unwise pleasures and needless extravagances, he chooses instead to save his money. He considers himself to be a responsible spendthrift. He does not draw on his inheritance but instead cautiously chooses not to live beyond his means. Though he has always had “strong passions and a fiery imagination, [his] tenacity of spirit saved him from the usual errors of youth” (Pushkin 285). Thus, while he successfully prevented himself from behaving recklessly when he was young, his feelings of deprivation have not left him. Hermann behaves similarly towards gambling than he once did around youthful mistakes. He spends entire evenings, night after night, watching others play without participating. Just as he was a rebel at heart in his youth, he is “at heart a gambler, but he never [takes] a card in his hand” (Pushkin 285). When the players wonder why he never plays, he replies, “The game fascinates me, but I am not in the position to sacrifice the essentials of life in

the hope of acquiring the luxuries” (Pushkin 276). Thinking practically, Hermann prioritizes his necessities. Impressively, he can enjoy the game without giving in to the temptation to play.

Once he finally gives in to this temptation, however, Hermann completely loses himself. He can no longer keep himself away from gambling. After learning of the Countess’ miraculous ability to predict three cards in a row, he can no longer behave rationally. Enthralled with the prospect that it might be possible for him to also experience the same good fortune, he cannot stop thinking about the game. Indeed, “[her] story [makes] a strong impression on his imagination, and he [cannot] think of anything else all night” (Pushkin 285). He tries to stop himself from getting carried away with his gambling fantasies, reminding himself of what he once believed were life’s three winning cards: “economy, moderation, and industry” (Pushkin 286). Unfortunately, his old standards are not enough for him anymore. His “fiery imagination” takes hold; his “tenacity of spirit” fails. The mania which Hermann later develops reveals the desperation hiding underneath his initial rejection of gambling. At the beginning of the story, his fear of taking risks is enough for him to reject the game. However, once he discovers that there is a way to avoid this fear and guarantee himself to win, he is hooked. Hermann shows us how the gambling addict’s restraint is merely a veil which conceals a boundless, unyielding desire.

Like Hermann, Alexei rejects gambling at first. However, he does not share Hermann’s initial fascination with games of chance. Instead, Alexei admits that he does not enjoy gambling. He begins gambling on Polina’s behalf. For a reason unknown to him, she needs money. Because of his infatuation with her, he plays roulette for her, despite the fact that he feels “averse to doing so on behalf of someone else” (Dostoevsky 19). Upon entering the gambling rooms, Alexei is

irritated by what he sees and disgusted by the crowd of people that surrounds him. He claims that his mind is “anything but composed” (Dostoevsky 19) and that he wishes to leave immediately. He would choose not to gamble, he alleges, except he had already made a commitment to Polina. However, we soon see that Alexei’s assertions are unreliable. He quickly demonstrates that he is, in fact, drawn to gambling.

Despite his distaste, Alexei still expects something spectacular to happen once the betting begins. In the casino, he remembers his promise to himself: “that [he] would never leave Roulettenburg until some radical, some definitive, change has taken place in [his] fortunes” (Dostoevsky 19). While he claims to only have come to the gambling rooms because of Polina, his strong desire to win clearly plays a role in his staying. Alexei expects himself to win. Although he feels that “everything about [roulette seems] so sordid – morally nasty and dirty” (Dostoevsky 20), he accepts the greed of the game. As he rambles to the reader, creating his own moral justifications for why it is not wrong for him to play, we notice the early signs of Alexei’s desperation. Indeed, he is determined to take from this “futile and mindless pursuit” (Dostoevsky 20) a monumental change in his life. Thus, Alexei’s persistence reveals a contradiction: he both accepts and rejects gambling, abhors and loves it. While he claims that roulette is useless, he still believes that it will ultimately bring him the radical change he desires.

The gambling addict lives in denial. Hermann contradicts himself, swearing that he is self-disciplined but somehow failing to control himself. Meanwhile, Alexei both judges and defends gambling. These men show us that the gambling addict cannot stop once he starts. Yet, despite this obvious sign of dependence, they still dismiss their own addiction. When Hermann’s obsession

with the Countess' secret causes him to accidentally kill her, Hermann denies his guilt. Rather than recognizing that his obsession has gone too far, he continues to fixate. While at the old woman's funeral, he callously mourns the loss of his opportunity to win, which he believes to have died with her. After her funeral, he continues to avoid feelings of guilt, drinking heavily "in the hope of silencing his inward agitation" (Pushkin 300). In resorting to binge drinking to quell his troubles, Hermann uncovers the extent of his ruinous desperation. Despite the fact that this mystery has already caused him to inflict so much damage on others, having previously led to Lizaveta's heartbreak and the Countess' death, Hermann remorselessly jumps at the chance to use the secret once the ghost reluctantly gives it to him. Additionally, his addiction forces him to abandon his conscience. Earlier in the story, before he enters the Countess' home to accost her for her secret, Pushkin writes, "In [Hermann's] heart there echoed something like the voice of a conscience, but it grew silent" (Pushkin 292). He cannot listen to his conscience because in order to keep gambling, he must deny the truth and avoid taking responsibility for his detestable actions.

Alexei also lives dishonestly. At the end of the novel, Mr. Astley, one of Alexei's old friends, shares his disappointment in Alexei. Mr. Astley laments that Alexei once had friends, goals, and interests. Mr. Astley claims that Alexei has given up on life. Confronting him, Mr. Astley says:

Although I can remember you during the strong, passionate period of your life, I'm persuaded that you have now forgotten all the better feelings you had at the time, and that your present dreams and aspirations do not rise above odd, even, black, the twelve middle numbers, and so on. (Dostoevsky 166)



This passage reminds us that, while Alexei ends the novel completely consumed by his gambling addiction, he was once a whole person with other passions. He was a man with promise. He was intelligent and spoke three languages. As Mr. Astley admits, he even used to be good-looking. He also once had a chance at love with Polina. Not only does Mr. Astley recognize that Alexei has changed, but he also recognizes that Alexei's addiction is so severe that he has forgotten himself and the life he once had. When describing the baseness of Alexei's present preoccupations, he says that they do not "rise above" the mere colors and numbers which appear at random orders during Alexei's roulette games. He aimlessly lists them: "odd, even, black, the twelve numbers, and so on." These meaningless outcomes are what now defines Alexei's life. In response to Mr. Astley's honesty, Alexei angrily tells him not to "bring all that up" (Dostoevsky 166). Dismissing his friend's concern, he tells Mr. Astley, "When the time comes, you will see me rise from the dead" (Dostoevsky 167). With these words, Alexei recognizes that he has lost himself but does not acknowledge gambling as the root cause. Instead, he pretends that gambling is the solution. He understands that he has gone astray, so much so that he describes himself as dead. However, he prescribes gambling with the mythical power to revive him. Thus, Alexei's mindset is like that of an alcoholic who drinks himself out of a hangover. He will be fine, he believes. He needs only win big one more time.

The gambling addict lies. He willfully believes that he can hold himself back, control himself, figure out the secret to winning, and double his worth the next time around. The odds are his. They must be. The game will change him. Unlike Alexander Bruno, the unsuccessful professional gambler from Part One who cannot control the game because he is undisciplined in life, the addict's problem is instead the gambling itself. Instead of enjoying other aspects of his

life, he loses himself to the allure of gambling. Observing Alexei and Hermann's descent into addiction, we witness how deprivation can rapidly turn into an addiction. Obsession is a warden, imprisoning the addict in a place which denies reality and consumes the rest of his life.

## Chapter Two: *Passion at Play*

The gambling addict is a passionate individual. However, addiction directs his intensity towards gambling, making greed the sole focus of his life. The previous chapter describes this phenomenon, but it does not delve into the way in which gambling replaces human connection, more specifically. Games of chance give the addict powerful feelings and physical sensations. In the case of Alexei, gambling diverts the focus he once had on love towards roulette. On the other hand, Hermann is a far more depraved character. Gambling destroys his capacity for empathy, encouraging him to resort to manipulation. He has so little love for others that he barely repents his actions except to save himself from harm. Addiction ruins both men's abilities to connect with others.

We first understand the strength of gambling's grasp on the addict through the physical sensations it gives him. Alexei demonstrates how these feelings influence his behavior. After winning a sizable sum, he unwisely gambles it away. He describes how roulette gives him feelings which prevent him from quitting while he is ahead:

That, of course, would have been the right time for me to have walked away, but there arose in me a strange feeling . . . Accordingly I set down the largest stake allowed by the rules – four thousand gulden – and lost. Fired up by this mishap, I pulled out all the money I had left, staked it all on the same number as before – and lost again. (Dostoevsky 31).

The “strange feeling” which arises in Alexei is powerful enough to control his behavior. Interestingly, Polina, the woman he loves, has a similar effect on him. At her request, he will quarrel with others and humiliate himself. However, by the end of the novel, gambling stops him

from returning to her. The inexplicable emotions which come from roulette are not altogether different from romantic interest. Gambling makes Alexei nervous, and he cannot fully understand these emotions, calling them “strange.” Much like the “butterflies” which accompany infatuation, these feelings give him a “sick feeling in [his] stomach” (Dostoevsky 23). At the same time, they fire him up. Like love, these passions leave him desperate enough to make witless decisions, having enough unfounded faith in the odds that he is willing to make massive bets on a whim. Later in the novel, Alexei becomes so enthralled with his winnings that he briefly forgets his love for Polina. Unable to take his eyes off the pile of money, he admits that “for a moment or two [he no longer thought of] Polina” (Dostoevsky 141). Within the same scene, he forgets her again. Under the influence of his gambling addiction, greed now consumes Alexei, eclipsing his romantic feelings for Polina.

While the passion for gambling fills Alexei’s heart, it hardens Hermann’s. To show that Hermann loses his ability to empathize with others, Pushkin describes how Hermann’s “heart [turns] to stone” (Pushkin 292). After numbing his emotions, his gambling mania drives him to feign love for Lizaveta and frighten the old woman to death. He sociopathically tries to evoke the Countess’ compassion while forcing her to reveal her gambling secret. He pleads, “If your heart has ever known the feeling of love . . . I entreat you by the feelings of a wife, a lover, a mother, by everything that is sacred in life, not to deny my request” (Pushkin 293). His desperation might make his entreaty appear genuine, but his perverse actions cannot hide his deceitfulness. When the old woman does not reply, he rapidly resorts to anger and threats. Meanwhile, the irony of his appeal is that while he asks for her sympathy, he feels nothing for others. Once Lizaveta discovers that he has been misleading her with false declarations of love, she finally realizes the truth:

"Money – that [is] what his soul [craves] for" (Pushkin 297). Pushkin personifies Hermann's winning cards to show how the gambling addict's inability to connect with people leads him to objectify others. Hermann no longer sees people in their human forms. Once he learns the Countess' secret, cards are the only thing on his mind. In his imagination, people's bodies take the shape of the three winning cards: three, seven, ace. He sees the three of hearts in a young woman's curves. In every pot-bellied man, he sees the ace. His obsession hurts and dehumanizes others, completely unchecked by his now silent conscience. It also ruins him. It makes him a cold, unfeeling man, until he is inhuman, and he is stone. Once greed overcomes empathy, the addict loses all kindness.

The gambling addict isolates himself from others. Hermann and Alexei both seclude themselves, but they do so at different severities. While Alexei does so because he cannot put his relationships above roulette, Hermann deliberately abuses others in the hopes that manipulating them will help him win. Both men are alone. However, their differences demonstrate how addiction follows consistent trends but does not manifest itself in the same way for every individual. The endings to both *The Gambler* and "The Queen of Spades" leave us with little hope for either protagonist, but at least we find a trace of Alexei left somewhere amid his delusion. He shows that he cares about more than just gambling, crying upon hearing about Polina, his former love. While Mr. Astley shows little faith in his friend, he still believes that Alexei is a gentleman. Ultimately, the old friends part on "terms of sincere affection" (Dostoevsky 171). Alexei returns to gambling, but we can still be sure that the older, more earnest version of himself still exists within him. Though his greed takes over, perhaps one day he will "rise from the dead" (Dostoevsky

167) as he has promised. Thus, we learn that the gambling addict can redeem himself. He needs only to choose love over greed.

### Chapter Three: *Magical Thinking*

This chapter explains the role of madness in the gambler's addiction. Gambling addict denies the randomness of luck. However, unlike the professional gambler, he does not see himself as having agency over the odds. Instead, he holds an almost religious fascination with luck. He searches for magical solutions which will reveal fortune's secrets. The professional gambler creates focused strategies to help him make informed gambling decisions, but the addict often responds to the game based on feeling, either leaving or remaining at the tables as his emotions guide him. He invents patterns, rules, and superstitions to explain the game's outcomes. Thus, the addict does not simply tell lies. He also invents truth.

In his discussion of the psychology behind gambling addiction as portrayed in *The Gambler*, the psychiatrist Dr. Sanju George identifies a cognitive characteristic of gambling addicts called "magical" thinking. Magical thinking, as he describes, happens when a person "[holds] irrational beliefs in particular outcomes" (George 7). For example, Alexei fixates on whether he is either playing for himself or on behalf of someone else. Clearly, the game should behave the same regardless of this superficial distinction, but Alexei does not understand this fact. The first time he gambles, Alexei initially feels unnerved by the fact that he is playing for Polina. He believes that playing for her will ruin his luck. However, the moment the odds work in his favor, he becomes entirely convinced that the opposite is true, and he thinks to himself: "If I had been playing for myself alone, I would never have had luck like this" (Dostoevsky 23).

The professional gambler holds his own irrational beliefs about how his behavior can influence the odds of the game, but he does not let himself "[fall] immediate prey to superstition" (Dostoevsky 23). By contrast, Alexei makes up facts based on false observations. He claims that

"a dozen or so middle numbers will always be followed by a dozen or so later ones" and that "if the ball stops twice in the last dozen, it will move on to the first dozen" (Dostoevsky 30). In his descriptions of this fake system he has apparently discovered, Alexei reveals that gambling makes him completely delusional. He defends his irrational practice and attacks the strategies of those who play like the professional gambler. He thinks to himself, "It seemed to me that calculation was superfluous and by no means had the importance that certain other players attached to it" (Dostoevsky 30). When Alexei criticizes the attention these gamblers place on calculation, he nonsensically denies the relevance of probability, which is, by definition, a driving force behind the outcomes in every game of chance.

The gambling addict is deeply superstitious. He also takes rumors and superstitions seriously. Hermann shows us how his desperate need to find a magical key to win causes him to believe in the impossible. When the Countess tells him that the story of the three winning cards is not true, calling it a joke, Hermann refuses to stop believing. Even though he has no evidence on which to claim that the secret must exist, he maintains his unreasonable faith in its magic. Ultimately, Hermann's gambling losses drive him mad. Pushkin ends the story with the haunting image of Hermann being kept in the psych ward of Obhukov hospital, feverishly muttering the names of the special cards, saying nothing else: "Three, seven, ace! Three, seven, queen!" (Pushkin 305). With this bleak ending, Pushkin leaves us with a strong message: being guided by greed will lead you into insanity.



## **Conclusion: What Can The Gambler Teach Us?**

What can the gambler teach us? This question is vague and so is its answer. I will answer a simpler question first: What about the gambler is relevant in each of our lives? The gambler matters because we are all constantly taking risks and making judgements based on uncertain outcomes. All of us take risks in our daily lives. We take our chances when we plan for our futures, and bet on or against those around us. When we comb through online restaurant reviews, judging which ones look most trustworthy; When we wonder whether it will be worth it tell someone how we feel; When we take the questionable sniff at freshly expired milk, deciding whether or not we should just take a sip: these are the gambles we take.

It is easy to judge a fictional character harshly. The gamblers I discuss in this thesis often make poor judgement calls while under pressure. Some of them, like Bond, are judgmental. Others, like Hermann, are cruel. We might be astonished by their dramatic responses to games. However, when we imagine that the uncertainties we deliberate over and the mistakes we make are not so different from that of the gambler, we might reserve our scrutiny. In Alexei's wish to change his life, we meet the dreamer in all of us. We recall the feeling of wanting something big, but not knowing what will be. Our own ambitions are not dissimilar to that which drives Alexei's addiction while his aspirations turn sour. In Bruno's character, we find bitterness which corrupts. We have all felt that our lives are unfair. This resentment in Bruno makes him completely unravel. Many of us have found ourselves in similar situations.

The value of fiction is that it lets us imagine people both similar and different from ourselves and gives us the chance to understand them. It lets us step outside ourselves and read

about characters who might remind us of ourselves. Even with characters as elusive to our understandings as top-secret spies, professional swindlers, and gambling lunatics like Bond, Bruno, Alexei, and Hermann, an analysis of their complexities can bring us closer to knowing who they are.

The professional gambler and the addict are alike in two important ways: neither understand outcomes in an unbiased, perfectly mathematical way and neither is immune to luck. It is a wonder then that one of these gamblers masters the game, while the other falls prey to it. Because none of us are rational, and none of us are immune to chance. We are then like both gamblers in these two ways as well. Since we all share these crucial things in common, my question to you is this: what can we learn from the gambler that we cannot apply to ourselves?

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